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American Anthropologist

NEW SERIES

ORGAN OF THE AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION, THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF WASHINGTON, AND THE AMERICAN ETHNOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF NEW YORK

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VOLUME 37

MENASHA, WISCONSIN, U. S. A.

PUBLISHED BY

THE AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

1935

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THE COMANCHE SUN DANCE

By RALPH LINTON

796 THE last Comanche Sun Dance was held in 1878, the date being fixed with certainty by an eclipse of the sun visible in Oklahoma in the same year. Even before this time the ceremony seems to have been falling into disuse, due perhaps to the harassed life which the tribe had led during the preceding twenty years. One informant had attended this last dance as a small child, but his memories of it were vague and the account given here must be understood to be based on second hand evidence.[1]

796 619 621 Whether the Sun Dance was ever a regular annual ceremony among the Comanche is uncertain. From at least 1860 on it was held at irregular intervals, whenever some individual received the necessary supernatural sanction. It also seems highly improbable that the whole tribe ever attended a single Sun Dance. The autonomy of the various bands within the tribe was complete and there was little feeling of solidarity among them. Participation seems normally to have been limited to the band of the supervising medicine man with a few others who were in close and friendly contact with it and who came by invitation. Informants frequently described the dance [801] as though only four bands were involved, but this was probably nothing more than a projection of the pattern of using four as a ritualistic number.

796 787 Every dance originated in a supernatural sanction received by some medicine man. This was probably in the form of a dream or vision, although informants were not certain. The originator was usually a young man who was just beginning his career. Those who volunteered to dance were also, as a rule, young men who had few war exploits to their credit. It was said that their subsequent careers would be watched to determine whether the sanction received by the medicine man was authentic and that his reputation would be strongly influenced by their success or failure. The medicine man had complete charge of the ceremony, arranging all the details in accordance with his sanction. From the differences in the accounts given by various informants it seems certain that there was a good deal of variation in the procedure, extending even to differences in the form of the lodge used on different occasions.

796 The ceremony was held approximately in midsummer and continued for eight days, the first four being devoted to the gathering of materials

[1] The present notice seems to be the first report of the Sun Dance among the Comanche. There are, in fact, specific statements of its nonoccurrence in W. P. Clark, Indian Sign Language (Philadelphia, 1885) and James Mooney, Calendar History of the Kiowa Indians (Seventeenth Annual Report, Bureau of American Ethnology, Part 1, 1900), p. 322.

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and the erection of the lodge and the last four to the dance proper. When 796
the medicine man had selected a place for the dance, invitations were sent
out to the various bands. Informants knew of no formality attending this.
The bands moved to the place by easy stages, always making four over
night halts en route. The camp was pitched in a semi-circle about the site [631]
chosen for the lodge. The members of each band camped together, but the
bands had no regular order in the circle.

When the camp has assembled, gathering of materials for the lodge was 796
begun. Cottonwood was used for the posts and brush covering and either 346
cottonwood or cedar for the screen inside the lodge. Men and women went
out together to cut the smaller posts and brush. They wore wreaths of sage
and joked and sang. When the materials had been cut they were tied to
ropes and hauled back by groups of men on foot. These men usually halted
four times on their way back to rest and sing.

The cutting and transportation of the center pole was left until the 796
last. There seems to have been no ceremony attending its selection. It was 346
cut, in various instances, by a virtuous Comanche woman (i.e., one who had 727
always been faithful to her husband), a virtuous captive woman, and a
captive man who had a number of war deeds to his credit. Although in-
formants could give no explanation of these selections, the use of captives
for this important office probably reflects their importance in the social
and economic life of the tribe. The Comanche captives, who were mostly [463]
Mexicans, tended the horse herds and practiced most of the specialized
industries such as gun repairing and saddle making. They were also en-
couraged to accompany their masters on war parties and, if brave fighters,
could rise to any position open to a full blood. The captive woman who was
faithful to her master or the captive man who had won war honors had
behaved in a commendable way and deserved to be honored by the whole
society.

The center pole itself was a tree trunk about fourteen feet long and one 796
foot in diameter with a fork at the upper end. After it had been felled and 346
peeled, it was carried bodily to the site of the lodge, twenty-five or thirty 483
men bearing it by means of ropes passed under it. The bearers were changed
frequently so that everyone would have a chance to help. Four stops were
always made en route.

The construction of the lodge was never begun until all the materials 796
were on the spot. The center pole was erected first, being planted in a hole 346
two to three feet deep. The upper end was supported and guided by means
of a forked sapling. Three unsuccessful attempts were made to lift it, it
being set on the fourth attempt. At each attempt the medicine man blew

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396 on his whistle of eagle bone. After the center pole had been set, the outer
346 circle of short posts and stringers was erected and rafters run from these to the fork in the center pole. In one case the entire lodge was then covered with cottonwood brush. In another only the walls were filled in with brush, the roof being left open. A single opening was left on the east side to serve as a door. Across the west side of the lodge a row of small cedar trees or cottonwood branches was set up, screening off an alcove into which the dancers could retire to rest and sleep.

While the lodge was being constructed, hunters were sent out to kill a
[532] three year old buffalo bull. At the dance where the lodge was fully roofed, the head and fore quarters of this animal were skinned and the skin stuffed with willow twigs, making a sort of manikin. This was set on top of the lodge with its head toward the east. In the dance where the open lodge was used the skin was simply placed in the fork of the center pole. During the
[786] time that the materials were being collected and the lodge erected ordinary rules of conduct were relaxed and there was a good deal of sexual license, although this apparently did not apply to close relatives.

796 When the lodge was finished or nearly finished, four or five clowns ap-
522 peared. The number of these performers does not seem to have been fixed
292 and anyone could adopt the rôle who wished. These clowns wore conical
536 helmets of willow twigs with the leaves and bark left on, the lower edges of the helmets coming down over their shoulders. They carried circular shields roughly woven of split willows, also with the leaves and bark, and long swabs or clubs made from willow saplings with the leafy twigs at their ends woven into a ball. They had large false noses of mud and their whole bodies, equipment and even their ponies were liberally daubed with mud. They road into camp at a gallop, chasing the people and dogs, striking anyone they could catch with their mud soaked swabs, and performing a variety of amusing antics. Those who were struck could not take offence, but people who did not want to take part in the fun would run into the lodges, where the mounted men could not reach them.

796 After the completion of the lodge, and probably after the clown's in-
541 vasion, there was a sham battle. While the finishing touches were being put to the lodge, some of the men had retired to the neighboring creek bottom and built a rough enclosure there, "like a rail fence." In this they established themselves, sometimes having women and children with them. A man who had served as a scout in actual combat came out from the main camp, located this "fort," and returned to report the presence of an enemy. All the warriors in camp then donned their full regalia and went out to attack it, followed by a crowd of spectators. During the attack each man reenacted

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his actual war deeds. When the "fort" had been taken, the whole group returned to camp singing victory songs. This episode symbolized the triumph of the Comanche over their enemies.

On the evening of this day the crier rode through the whole camp calling on the people to get ready. The members of each band assembled in front of their tipis and at a given signal all the bands began to move toward the lodge. Each band was marshalled and driven along by its War Whip Bearer. This functionary was chosen for bravery, being presumably the most important warrior in the band. He directed all dances and was allowed to strike any one who refused to dance, or who seemed backward, with his war whip, a long flat club, notched along one edge. Even to point this club at an individual was enough to bring him into the dance since he would fall ill if he refused.

The various bands moved toward the lodge obliquely, avoiding a direct approach to the entrance but marching in such a way that they would all finally congregate in front of it. As they moved each band did its favorite dance and sang a song of its own. When the first song was finished, the War Whip Bearer called on the band to halt, saying that he had something with which to quench the people's thirst. He then recounted some of his war deeds, assuring the people that they were not true, although they actually were. At the mention of each man whom he had killed the drum was struck. After this coup counting another song would be begun and the people would dance forward again. There were four halts of this sort, the last one finding them in front of the door of the lodge. Here the whole group danced for some time with a slow stamping step. Finally, the camp crier announced that the real dance would begin in the morning, saying that the herd of buffalo had been located by the scout sent out to find them. The people then dispersed.

The dance proper began the following morning with the buffalo round up. Four men, all brave warriors, had been selected to play the part of the buffalo. They were disguised in buffalo robes, one always being that of an old and scabby bull. These men were hidden at some distance from the camp and an especially brave warrior was sent out to find them and drive them in. He carried a bow and arrows in his right hand and a torch in his left, these being the means for killing and cooking the buffalo. The warrior came back driving the buffalo before him and into the lodge. Three of them went in at once, but the old bull ran around the lodge four times before he entered. After this ceremony, which symbolized the bringing of food to the people, the "buffalo" removed their costumes and left the lodge quietly. The same person might act both as a buffalo and as one of the regular

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796 535 dancers, but this was rarely the case since the buffalo were older men of established reputation while the dancers were usually young.

796 535 513 346 Early on this same morning the wives of the dancers, or, if they were unmarried, any of their close female relatives, made beds for them in the screened alcove at the western side of the lodge. These beds consisted of heaps of sage with robes over them. A large rounded heap of moist sand was also built. When the dancers were exhausted they would retire behind the screen and throw themselves upon this so that they would be revived by its dampness and coolness. After the beds had been made and the sand heap built no one was allowed behind the screen except the medicine man and the actual dancers.

796 535 783 515 The crier warned everyone who wished to attend the dance to bathe that morning. The dancers also bathed. This was a common preliminary to seeking to establish relations with the supernatural, as when a man was going to a medicine man's grave to get power from his ghost. It was a form of purification or consecration, although in this case it was not attended by any ceremony.

796 535 [538] After the noon meal the people went into the lodge and the dance began. The drummers, old men who also led in the singing, seated themselves near the door or about the fire place. Unfortunately, the location of the fire place in the lodge was not ascertained. They had a large circular drum or drums of the sort used in ordinary dances. These drums were beaten by several men simultaneously. They also carried rattles which apparently could be of any sort. The spectators, both men and women, seated themselves around the sides of the lodge three or four deep.

796 535 302 [293] While the audience and orchestra were taking their places, the dancers went behind the screen with the medicine man and painted themselves. Often they helped to paint each other. This painting seems to have been rather varied. In the ceremony in which the roofless lodge was used all the dancers painted solid yellow. In that with the closed lodge each dancer was painted differently and there was a variety of colors and designs. All informants agreed that, although the paint was renewed each morning of the ceremony, each man wore the same designs throughout. The dancers were stripped to breech clout and moccasins and carried no paraphernalia except their eagle bone whistles. None of these were seen, but they are described as identical with those used by other Plains tribes in the Sun Dance.

796 535 They were usually eight to twelve dancers. When they first emerged from behind the screen they danced with their arms stretched toward the sun, but as they became exhausted they dropped their arms and merely moved their shoulders with a shrugging motion, stamping at the same

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time. Each time they shrugged and stamped they blew a short blast on the eagle bone whistle. When certain special songs were sung all the spectators would join in, rise and dance too to encourage them. The medicine man stayed behind the screen most of the time, but when the dancers seemed to be flagging he would come out and reinvigorate them. He would do this by taking his fan, made of the tail feathers of the road-runner, and, while holding it horizontal, sweep it around in a circle from left to right. As he swept it around he blew along it and each dancer, as it came in line with him, began to dance hard again.

From time to time, apparently whenever interest was flagging, one of the spectators would come forward and hang a gift of some sort on the center pole. While doing so he would pray for a long and happy life. Small boys were encouraged to shoot arrows into the fork of the pole as their offerings. These offerings were sacred and could not be touched. When the people went away at the end of the dance the things were simply left there to be destroyed by the elements. However, visitors from other tribes who happened to be present during the dance could put an offering on the pole and take down something else in exchange. One informant, when a small boy, had visited a Kiowa Sun Dance lodge after the dance and had, on the advice of his grandfather, exchanged his old breech clout for a new one hanging on the pole. When they got back to camp their own people said that this was dishonest.

According to Post Oak Jim, the informant mentioned above, the medicine man in charge might come out from time to time and do sleight of hand tricks to show his power. He might put a knife down his throat and bring it up covered with blood. Then he would blow on the blade and the blood would disappear. Sick people might also call on the medicine man for special help during the dance, although whether he treated them on the spot was not ascertained. No other informants mentioned these features, but healing is such a frequent element in Comanche ceremonies that they may well have taken it for granted. All the spectators were believed to benefit by the ceremony and to go away improved in health and spirits.

On the first day the dance ran from early in the afternoon until sunset. There was then a halt of about two hours to rest and eat, after which the dance began again and continued until midnight. After the evening session had ended, the dancers went down to the creek under guard of a man chosen by the medicine man and bathed. They sat and splashed in the water but were forbidden to dive in or to drink. They then returned and slept behind the screen on the beds prepared for them. They danced the next morning, afternoon, and evening, with intervals at noon and night for them to rest

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796 and for the spectators to eat. This continued for three days. All the people
535 had to bathe every morning before entering the lodge.

796 The dancers underwent no torture other than exhaustion and abstain-
535 ence from food and drink. Even the abstinence was not complete. Dancers
785 were allowed to chew slippery elm bark during the rest periods, also to drink the mucilaginous fluid obtained by scraping the inside of strips of this bark. They were allowed to eat the dried wild plums which would be found lying on the ground under plum bushes at this season of the year and possibly other dried fruits as well.

796 The condition of the dancers was closely watched and if it seemed that
535 any dancer would be unable to last out the full period his father would
783 arrange for his release. The father went to the medicine man and without making him the formal smoke offering required when his aid was asked in other matters, gave him a gift and asked that the young man be excused. If the medicine man accepted the gift, the young man was told to go behind the screen, take up his bed and leave. His father went with him from the lodge to the creek, where the young man washed his mouth out, dived in four times against the current and then washed his mouth again. After this he was free to go home. Diving four times against the current was also a part of the ritual used in relinquishing any supernatural power which had become burdensome. Sometimes another man would take the place of the one who had been released and finish the dance for him, but informants did not know how this was arranged. Actually, such releases were very infre-
[558] quent, as they were considered disgraceful.

796 The dance ended at midnight on the fourth day. Informants were not
535 sure whether the dancers underwent any ceremony of secularization at the end of the ceremony. The next morning camp was broken and the various bands moved back to their own ranges. Four over night halts had to be made on the return trip. Even the band in whose territory the dance had been held would move away, leaving the lodge with its offerings deserted. Shortly after the dance a series of small feasts would be given, one in honor of each dancer. To these feasts only the dancer, his relatives, the medicine man, and the old men of the Sun Dance orchestra would be invited.

Very little regarding the symbolism or purpose of the dance is remem-
[346] bered at the present time. The whole lodge is said to have represented an eagle's nest while the buffalo manikin or pelt placed on top of the center pole is said to have been food for the eagle. In their movements and whistling the dancers were supposed to be imitating young eagles not yet able to fly.

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Apparently the purpose of the ceremony was partly to increase the importance of the medicine man, who remained the central figure throughout, partly to improve the well being of the whole group, especially their physical health. The dancers, as a result of their participation, received an increase in their supernatural power, but they seem to have drawn this from the medicine man rather than directly from the Sun, the Eagle, or any other supernatural being. This would be in accordance with the general Comanche pattern of obtaining power from other individuals more frequently than they obtained it by direct contact with supernatural beings. Visions might come to the dancers during the dance, but these were in the nature of unusual benefits not specifically sought for or expected. The only instance of such a vision which informants remembered was not that of a dancer but that of a man who impersonated the old bull in the initial ceremony of driving in the buffalo. At the end of the chase this man was so exhausted that, when he started out of the lodge, he partially lost consciousness and had to cling to the center pole. When he came to he told the people that he had had a vision of a white man with long white curly hair. The Comanche believe that this was Jesus, although it happened before missionaries had come among them. As they had had Christian Mexican captives living among them from at least 1750 on, they were probably familiar with Christian ideology even at that time. Since the Comanche are not secretive with regard to their visions or other supernatural experiences, the fact that this is the only Sun Dance vision remembered would indicate that such visions were very rare.

There is documentary evidence that the Comanche did not reach their historic territory until about 1700 and it seems highly probable that they had emerged from the northern plateau area only a few generations before. It is certain that during the historic period they were actively engaged in borrowing elements of Plains culture from their neighbors and that certain of these elements had not been perfectly assimilated at the time of their final subjugation. I believe that the rather wide range of variation in certain details of the Sun Dance, such as the form of the lodge, can best be explained by the assumption that the Comanche had not had the Sun Dance long enough to establish a complete and integrated pattern for the ceremony. If so, many of the details of particular Sun Dances might be determined largely by the officiating medicineman's knowledge of the Sun Dance rituals of neighboring tribes, especially the Kiowa and Cheyenne. Most of the older informants were familiar with the Kiowa Sun Dance and considered their own as very much the same. The use of a fan of roadrunner feathers to invigorate the dancers was cited as a specific identity. At the same time,

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they stressed the fact that the Comanche did not use a Sun Dance image while the Kiowa did.

The material on which the preceding report is based was collected by the Ethnological Field Party of the Laboratory of Anthropology, Santa Fé, New Mexico, while working with the Comanche during the summer of 1933.

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